

When You Were You (And I Was Lonesome) by twowritehands

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Summary:

Jim and Joyce ricochet off one another through the years as grief calls them together in various ways.

(Pre-series up through series events and after.)

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title from that awesome song playing when Hopper does CPR on Will:

"When It's Cold I'd Like to Die" - Moby

An open grave with a black casket inside. Eighteen year old Joyce stood on the grassy lip of it, staring down at her father's final resting place. A blood clot in the brain. Two months before her high school graduation; the man had talked about nothing else and now he would miss it. Joyce felt sick.

She cried and cried and cried. Long after the ceremony, she stood at the grave and tried to hear his voice or feel his presence. But he was just gone.

Her best friend, Kathy Hopper, held her hand. Kathy's twin brother Jim gave her a bouquet of yellow flowers and, sitting with her on the tombstone in the February chill, offered a kind of silent comfort. He didn't snap her bra or fart or do any of the things he usually did to annoy Kathy and her friends. He cried a little himself and shared his memory of old Jonny Byers teaching woodshop.

Boys always thought her father was so cool because he had part of his thumb missing as absolute proof of how dangerous carelessness around a saw could be, making woodwork a manly endeavour to be proud of. After thirty years, even the best would lose a thumbnail to the job.

Talking about her daddy's passion for teaching and his student's admiration of him made Joyce laugh as she cried, which felt so much better than crying just from crying. With Kathy on one side and Jim on the other, she felt a little less alone.

Kathy was already tall but her black heels made her taller, and she

filled out her black dress better than Joyce filled hers, which didn't fit right across her too-flat chest. Also towering over Joyce, Jim was wearing a white shirt with a back tie. His blond hair was slicked back and he was quieter and more respectful than usual. Joyce still couldn't believe how much more mature it made the cocky jock seem.

"I still have the dog house he helped me build." Jim said hoarsely.

Kathy snorted, "Not that Mom and Dad have ever let a dog live in it."

"I'll get me a dog when I move out," he vowed. Next fall, he was headed to Indiana State. Kathy, too. Not Joyce. The only thing her stepmom expected her to do next was get married.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now..." she said, scared. The world seemed too big and now she was alone in it. She had the distinct Impression that the only person who ever *really* loved her was gone. She knew her new stepmother only put on a show in that regard.

"Well..." Kathy rubbed Joyce's back, "We can just sit here for a little longer and then go get a milkshake."

She and Kathy always got milkshakes together. It would be like normal. Joyce shivered. Jim put his jacket around her. The warmth soaked through her thin mourning dress and matching coat and comforted her further. She kept thinking everything would be okay if she could just talk to her dad one more time.

She sniffed and closed her eyes, listening....feeling.... nothing . He just wasn't there . Like her mom. The woman who died in childbirth had never been more than a name and a picture. Joyce had never felt anything connecting her to the missing woman. And now, despite a lifetime of memories, she felt nothing connecting her to the body in the ground. Vanished.

She crumpled, blubbering. "HE NEVER SAID GOODBYE!" she gasped and choked. Jim held her close. He smelled good, and his calloused fingers tilted her face. Their lips met.

Her first kiss, the worst day of her life. Her lips were too numb with cold to feel it. Her heart too numb with grief to care that the handsomest boy in school would even think to kiss her, let alone do it. When their frozen lips peeled apart he looked at her, and she wished a lot of things were different. She wished her dad was still alive. She wished the Hopper twins would stay in town with her. She wished she didn't have to be a grown up alone in the world so suddenly.

Kathy didn't say a word about the kiss. Joyce didn't know what to think. For as long as she had been friends with Kathy, Jim was always just kind of around. Not a friend. Not a stranger.

Usually he was an annoyance, teasing Joyce just as much as he teased his sister. His abrupt, messy breakup with Chrissy Carpenter had painted him as the school's biggest jerk; only Kathy defended him. Was that a twin honor code or did he deserve the defense?

Kathy sat close on Joyce's other side, for warmth. When Jim wasn't looking, Kathy gave her a little wink. Joyce felt a little less numb inside and the thrill of what had just happened--her first kiss--was finally catching up to her. Jim took her hands and held both in his until heat came back to her fingers.

The next six months passed in a blur of self indulgent escape. Home was awful, a step mom that never saw Joyce when she looked at her. A half brother who was more important. Her dad's things going into boxes. Pictures of him taken from the walls "because it's just too sad, don't you think?"

Joyce didn't have to face her step mother or consider things like heaven or hell or life as an orphan when in the company of Jim Hopper. So she spent as much time as possible with him.

Ever since their kiss in the graveyard, Jim smiled sweetly at her whenever she saw him, and they went to see movies together a lot. I. The back row, he put his arm around her and if the movie wasn't

interesting they passed the time kissing. What happiness she still had in life came from him and her friends. Around that time, Kathy started dating Jim's best friend Benny Hammond, and everything became a double date.

Jim made them all laugh, he held Joyce's hand, carried her books down the hall, and punched the daylight out of the first guy to suggest she was as easy as Chrissy Carpenter if she was on Jim Hopper's arm.

Chrissy, meanwhile, looked at Joyce like she would happily claw her eyes out. Other girls looked envious, too. Kathy only ever giggled and hugged Joyce and told her she thought she and Jim "were cute together." Joyce was glad--as much as Jim made her heart race these days, she wouldn't go out with him if Kathy had a problem with it.

Jim kissed her hello and goodbye, and if they spent time together without Kathy and Benny, he kissed her just to kiss her. Those kisses were very different. He taught her about French kissing, how to move her tongue in fun ways after she put it inside his mouth.

Kathy obviously threatened him in some effective way--perhaps her massive new boyfriend would be utilized--because Jim was only ever a gentleman. His hands stayed on her waist or her back. He never kept her out too late--even though the Wicked Stepmother could care less--and he always defended her honor if it was slighted in any way.

Joyce was grateful not to be pressured to go all the way. Because the night of graduation, Kathy gave it up to Benny and reported that it had hurt a lot and had been weird, which didn't sound like anything Joyce was ready for.... But then, as the summer after graduation wore on, people started using the word "adult" to describe the four of them, and Joyce began to imagine things.

It seemed impossible that Jim could ever hurt her... But she didn't know how to ask him for more when they were kissing in his car and her feverish body wanted it. She felt the man he was going to be in him, so strong and so loving, and she wanted to give herself over to him. Even when it felt like he would burn her up, all she could think was what a perfect way to die. (Inevitability, though, he let her go,

pulling away with ragged breath to announce it was getting late and he should get her home, and Joyce always wrestled with profound relief as well as frustrated disappointment.)

Conversely, when they weren't kissing, she had the common sense to be thankful he was such a gentleman. Away from his lips and his hands, she could sense the danger of *ever* going all the way with Jim Hopper, who would be gone by the fall. Sometimes she hated him for being so wonderful when he had to leave. She thought he couldn't really mean for things to be serious--that must be why he only ever kissed her.

They never ever talked about the future and how he was going to college in the city. Kathy too. Even Benny had plans to spend a year on his uncle's shrimp boat down in the bayou. Just like Joyce didn't like to think of her father's sudden death, she didn't like to think about her impending abandonment, either. She kept topics light and fun. She spent that summer in complete denial.

Walking around town with Kathy and Benny, hand in hand with Jim as the four of them talked, laughed, and shared what cigarettes Joyce managed to steal from her stepmom, that was why Joyce bothered to get out of bed in the morning in a house made colder without her dad in it.

Her favorite memories-in-the-making were sitting up at the quarry, watching the sunset. Jim would sit under the same blanket as her, often behind her with his knees parted so that she could recline between them, against his chest, his breath in her hair.

The grief she hid from often caught up to her in these quiet settings, and when it did, Jim held her close and let her cry it out. Then he dried her tears and kissed smiles back onto her lips. He tickled her and made her shriek and punch him. He got her blood racing by chasing her around. He made her heart full to bursting by whispering things when he caught her, things about how he had never felt like this before.

Joyce got scared in these moments. Jim made the world suddenly big again, big and--lonely. He was leaving. Not fair. Cruel, even. When he brushed her hair from her face and said, "I wanna do things right," looking at her like she was the world, she turned away and changed the subject, suddenly terrified and lost and confused. Never in her life did she need a mother and father as much as right then. She had no guidance, no one to show her that the jump wouldn't kill her.

Benny broke Kathy's heart some time in June--Chrissy Carpenter had gotten her revenge by sinking her claws in where it would shatter their group most effectively. It got ugly. Lines were drawn for war.

Joyce withdrew. The end of Kathy and Benny was a wake up call for her. None of it could last, and if she didn't start protecting herself now then she would shatter when Jim left Hawkins, and took his sister with him, and left Joyce here with... her shitty part time job and the vague hope of making enough money to get her own car and her own place...

She got a job, which was several hours a day away from the safe haven of her friends. There, she had started spending time with Lonnie, who also worked at the furniture store. The twenty year old was new in town and didn't hide his interest in her. He shared her hatred of the job and was in the same boat as her: stuck in Hawkins.

What she found refreshing was that Lonnie didn't think it was such a miserable thing to be in this town. He had prospects here, and when he talked about it, it made her feel better about staying close to the familiar. He also made her laugh, and more importantly, he often worked shirtless, his back muscles glistening as he carried kitchen chairs and tables and shelves and TV sets, images which lingered in Joyce's mind.

It was purely self preservation when she dodged Jim's kiss one night and said, "We should just end this now, don't you think?"

The smile in his eyes burned out, face dropping, "Are you serious?"

Joyce laughed bitterly, "You're leaving on Monday , Hopper!" She rarely called him by his last name. Doing so now was another line she drew between them.

He caught her hand, "Who says you can't come with us?" he asked. She pulled her hand back, shaking her head with a condescending laugh. Her heart had done a painful twist with fear at the thought of leaving Hawkins.

"And what would I do? Live under Kathy's dorm room bed?"

He laughed, "Maybe."

"This. Is not. A joke."

"Joyce--" he started but she backed up, tears slipping from her eyes. She had looked at the possibilities from every angle and there were none. So she choked it out, even though it hurt like hell,

"Bye, Hop," she turned and ran from him.

She wouldn't answer the phone. Kathy came by for one last hug, which Joyce gave, but she wouldn't say much. Based on the things Kathy said, it was clear she didn't know that Jim had asked Joyce to go with them. He must have not mentioned it, because he must have realized the impossibility of it.

Then, like she knew it would, the day came that the Hopper twins--the only consistency in her life, and, more recently, the brightest joy she'd ever known--were gone.

They had new shiny lives to start living. She couldn't even be mad at them for it. Kathy had been valedictorian, Hopper a football star with brains as well as brawn. They had a million opportunities at their feet and deserved every one of them.

She left cards for them in their mailbox, wishing them luck because she didn't want things to end badly with Jim. Kathy called a few times that first year, but no word from Jim... finally, the last strings broke.

After that, Joyce only had Lonnie. She wasn't in high school anymore, so what she did wouldn't put her on any lists. What was more, when the kissing felt good and her body ached, she didn't have to figure out how to ask him for it. All she had to do was not stop him when his hands began to roam on that first date.

Lonnie was charming, and she was lonely. He had his own place where she could get away from her stepmom and the new boyfriend who came into the picture way too soon, like he had been waiting in the wings for Joyce's father to drop dead. The best part was that he never said those heavy, serious things which Jim used to say and which was what made it hurt so bad when he left. Lonnie kept things light and fun and as a result Joyce never felt overwhelmed or frightened.

Of course, escaping the house that was no longer home and sleeping every night at Lonnie's had its consequence: seven pounds and eight ounces. Jonathan Byers, after her father. Lonnie's eyes but not his name, illegitimate stamped on the birth certificate. Women whispering behind their hands in supermarkets.

The only time Lonnie ever mentioned marriage was when his draft number came up, but then it turned out it was enough just to prove the kid was his and that she couldn't provide for Jonathan well enough on her own. Their little accident, what a perfect excuse not to go to Vietnam. Meanwhile, Benny Hammond and Danny Sinclair went into the infantry, right on the front lines in that far away jungle, very handsome in their uniforms.

Her life with Lonnie happened like the thing that comes along when you don't do anything to stop it: another kid and a common law marriage. Fifty hour work weeks. Crying babies. Panic attacks. A new house with a fat mortgage. A second job. Bail money. Perfume on his shirts that wasn't hers. Flashing blue lights in the drive way, radios crackling with words like "domestic dispute." Silent treatment over breakfast. Sleeping in the boys' room.

Sharp words and broken dishes. A grown man on his knees, crying for forgiveness. Waiting for the phone to ring when he was out all night. No longer caring when he didn't always come home. Hating him as he and his sleazy buddies laughed at the way baby Will ran, jokes about queers. Lipstick in the glove compartment of his car. Staring at the ceiling during sex, wondering who he was thinking about.

At times it hurt to look at her life and claim it as her own. Joyce had had dreams once, for something better than this, but she could not call them to mind now. She had too much to worry about, like dishes and laundry, and the house payment and new tires for the car. And then there was Lonnie.

She shared a bed with the man, and a toilet, and a fridge. Nothing else. His latest promotion at the furniture store paid too well and he often had large wads of cash, so whatever he was into, it couldn't be legal. Skimming the books. Selling stuff that fell off the delivery trucks he managed, then blowing the cash mostly on large bets. What the hell was she supposed to do? Take the boys and go--but where? Just like when she was eighteen, the thought of stepping away from Hawkins and into the big bad world was too daunting.

Through her new job at the general store, Joyce often saw Mrs. Hopper who still said hello and asked after her. Joyce gave vague general answers, not wishing to burden the woman who was only being polite. Asking after Kathy, Joyce learned that her once upon a time best friend had become a lawyer and was married with three kids in Michigan. They were strangers now. Jim was nearer by, in the city, a cop .

When Joyce asked about it, Mrs. Hopper thanked the powers that be that her Jimmy's draft number never came up or else he would have certainly gone and she might have lost him! Joyce shared in that relief even though Jim was now and forever out of her reach. Married. A father. His daughter was Will's age. Problems with her

lungs, in and out of hospitals.

For all her troubles, Joyce knew to be thankful that her boys were healthy. She said prayers for little Sara Hopper. She idly remembered her father's fresh grave, that little bouquet of yellow roses and a frozen first kiss which had led to so many other warmer kisses, so many sunsets on that quarry...and so she said a prayer for Jim, too. He didn't deserve the heartache of a sick child.

There was the rare weekend when the boys were with Lonnie's mom, who helped when she could as if to make up for her son's failings as a husband and father. One such weekend, Joyce spent the day hearing more and more gossip about Jim Hopper's sick girl. The news was getting around town and a collection had started. Cancer. The word was like a curse you didn't want to call by name.

Joyce came home that night with her mind on the blessing of a healthy family, and for once she had a heart willing to forgive and make amends. You have to hold onto what you've got, right? Her boys only had one father, after all.

But inside she found some blond bimbo hanging half off the bed and Lonnie pounding away between the woman's naked thighs. They were so engrossed in each other they did not hear her car or the front door. They only noticed her when she pushed the bedroom door all the way open. The girl gasped and giggled like there was this massive joke and Joyce was the punchline. Lonnie shot to his feet.

Joyce turned right around--ignoring Lonnie's pleas to stop and listen--and got in her car and sped away back toward town.

Her hands shook.

She walked into the bar with tear tracks down her face and ordered between sniffles. Benny Hammond, who moonlighted here to keep his new burger joint afloat, bent over the bar, "You okay, sweetheart?"

"No," she sniffed, "I--married--an-- asshole ."

Benny chortled, “Yeah. Lonnie’s a piece of work, eh, Hop?”

At the name, Joyce looked up sharply.

“If I had jurisdiction, I’d arrest him for ya,” said a long forgotten but familiar voice. Jim Hopper.

Notes for the Chapter:

This chapter is a beast. Chapters to come will not be as fast paced with so much summing up. Had a lot of years to cover to get us to where the fun part begins! Fair warning, the infidelity tagged for this fic is not limited to Lonnie’s actions in this chapter. (No one is going to be 100% innocent in this fic).

2. Chapter 2

The man in front of Joyce looked so different from the young man in her memories she doubted she would have picked him from a crowd.

Hopper looked like *shit*. Bags under his eyes. Hair like he couldn't stop running his hands through it, seeming to already recede so that he had a long forehead over a low and far too serious brow. A five o'clock shadow on what would otherwise be a stark face of wide, sharp features. Bloodshot, droopy eyes.

"HOP!" she cried in shock and jumped down off her stool with her arms open. He lifted from his and leaned enough to get an arm around her. He smelled like booze.

Joyce was by then used to seeing some boys she knew from school return from war a little different. If she hadn't known any better, she'd have thought his number had come up, and he'd witnessed bloody horrors and suffered with helplessness and despair. But she knew that his war had been a whole different kind. The enemy so much closer to home.

"What are you doing in town?"

He breathed out a long weary sound, "Aaahhhh, had to get away. Figured mom and pop could loan me a couch to pass out on."

"Hey, actually I heard about your daughter," Joyce said.

The way he winced, looked away, and downed a glass of dark amber liquor made her regret bringing it up. Stupid thing to mention. She kicked herself.

"Doctors are using the word *terminal*," he rasped. He put his fist to his quivering lips. His voice was such a sad sound; thin and brittle, breaking over the shape of the words.

Benny snapped a towel over his meaty shoulder and reached over the bar to grip Hop by the back of his neck, "Hey, man, we've all got you in our prayers."

Joyce echoed with an affirmative, dropping her hand on Hop's. She saw he wore a blue braided bracelet around his wrist. Clearly something a young girl made--it was strung with tiny lettered beads that spelled *Daddy* which he had turned against the tender inside of his wrist.

Her heart broke. Joyce had been thinking so much lately of Jim Hopper's daughter but she had yet to think of him as someone's Daddy. Joyce could remember well how a little girl's Daddy was her whole world. With an old twinge, she missed her own father.

Joyce took the stool right next to Jim, hand still on his. He pressed on his eyes with the other hand, choking back tears the way men do when they were trying not to cry. "She's *six* goddamn years old!"

With a light gasp, she covered her mouth. Will was six. In so many ways, that was still just a baby. Far too young to look death in the eye. Tears slipped from Joyce's eyes. Meanwhile, Benny came promptly around the bar, picked Hop up off his seat and crushed him in a chest to chest man hug. Joyce could do nothing but hang back and hold her heart with tears in her eyes.

Eventually Benny let Hop go--the hug had drawn out much, much longer than Joyce expected, she'd gone ahead and lit a smoke while she waited--and the men returned to their respective places at the bar.

Jim scrapped a broad palm over the scruff on his jaw and neck, and Joyce wondered at the way boys become men. Jim had always been tall and broad but not like he was now. Life had painted its lines around his eyes and set his proud shoulders with grief. She thought of her boys, so fresh and precious--she hoped life would be kind to them.

Hop eyed her bud so she slid him the pack. He promptly helped himself. There was a No Smoking sign behind Benny, but Benny said nothing. "Tell us what Lonnie did this time," Benny said to her, and she would have dismissed it--she wasn't the type to air her dirty laundry in public--but she could tell by the look Benny shot her that he was hoping to change the subject.

"He's a rat cheating bastard," she said. "I'm at work to pay our bills, and h-he's got some--some *bimbo* , you know. In *our* bed!" Fuming and shaking her head, she drew on her bud, puffing it out with a flap of her lips, "I knew he had girls but, that's the bed *I* sleep in. My boys sleep in that bed when they're sick!"

Jim drank from his refilled glass, shaking his head, "Well, damn. What did you expect when you married *Lonnie Ludgate* ?" They hadn't gone to school with Lonnie, but Jim had never liked him from the moment they met back in the days when he would pick Joyce up from her shifts at the furniture store.

"Look, I never actually married him," she defended sharply. Once upon a time, Joyce had chalked the animosity between Hopper and Lonnie up to teenaged jealousy. After all, Lonnie had never masked his attraction to Joyce and had flirted openly even when Jim was around. Now she realized Hopper's distaste had been purely a keener sense of character. She almost resented Hop for allowing her to end up with Lonnie. But then, it wasn't his fault. He had asked her to leave Hawkins...

"Common law marriage," Benny offered. Hop accepted this with a nod as Joyce continued, smoke trail from the cigarette between her fingers painting pictures from her animated hand gestures.

"Yeah. Right, and-- this is precisely *why* , you know? I mean, it's not like he ever asked me, but I didn't want to *be asked*. Right? Because, I *knew* who he was. I knew. But, you know, I stayed. I gave him two babies. I stayed for their sake. We have a house. He keeps saying we're a family, you know. So I stayed. But now? Ha! It's just. I can't. He's--uuuggghh, I am done with him. Thank God I gave the boys my name. They don't need to be tied to his shit by name. They don't deserve it."

Benny grunted in agreement, "I'll kick his ass next time I see him, all right?"

"Please do," she said with dark sincerity. Hop slapped the bar with his hand.

"Well then, let's do it tonight!" the man cried and Benny and Joyce

laughed. Hop stood, "I'm serious. That dirtbag! I need to hit something and who better than him?"

Benny snorted with agreement, "Damn straight. The man used fatherhood to dodge the draft and then won't even take care of his own kids. Makes Joyce do everything. He ain't no daddy to them boys. I'm in." Benny saw her hedging so he shrugged. "Joyce?"

He clapped his two massive paws together and turned to her, "Cordially invite us back to your place to hang out and talk about Jesus--unless of course someone there wants to pick a fight and we must defend ourselves." He wagged his eyebrows.

Joyce cackled, "I don't know, guys," she shook her head and drew smoke into her lungs.

"Do you or do you not want him to pay?" Hop asked darkly, words a little slurred. "He took some plastic tittied whore to your bed and wants you to forgive him, right? Like last time, right?"

Joyce had the sinking feeling that the whole damn town had known about this girl for a very long time. And she realized in stark clarity that this wasn't the first time he fucked someone else in that bed. Of course it wasn't. Humiliation and seething rage coursed through her. "Damn right he should pay," she rasped.

Benny called over his shoulder to old Wes that he was cutting his shift short as Hop whooped and the two of them barreled out of the bar. Joyce stubbed out her cigarette and hurried after them. They paused at her car and looked back her.

She made fists at her sides and drew her shoulders up, "Okay. Get in," she ordered the hulking men and they piled into her little car, which struggled under the combined weight of the former high school linebackers. She drove with swirls for eyes, though the shaking in her hands had stopped. By the time she had parked in her driveway she had a moment of doubt. This wasn't exactly fair, two big guys blindsiding him like this... And Benny was a freaking *Marine*.

They had all climbed out into the cool night air when Lonnie rushed

out onto the porch, "Babe, it didn't mean anything--" he stopped when he saw she hadn't come back alone. He knew ol' Benny, and hedged a little away from him. He eyed Jim, not even recognizing him.

"Lonnie," she said, puffed up with false bravado, "Pack your stuff and go. Tonight. Don't ever come back."

From there it got messy. Lonnie refused to go. He was threatened by Hop and then by Benny. He pissed on their threats and shoved Hop with an order to get off his property. Hop shoved him back hard enough to knock him on his ass. Joyce shrieked, and she must have said his name because Lonnie asked, climbing to his feet, "Hopper? You're the pretty boy she was dating when I met her? The hell happened to you?"

Without warning, Hop slammed his fist into Lonnie's nose. Lonnie tackled him. Benny picked Lonnie up and threw him. Lonnie got a bat and hit Benny in the kidney. Hop got a few good punches in once he got Lonnie pinned to the hot hood of the car.

The rage in Hop frightened Joyce and she knew it had nothing to do with Lonnie, which was why it was so dangerous. She screamed for him to stop and only managed to get him to listen when she caught his arm as it drew back. Lonnie slid to the ground. Hop came to his senses with a look of horror at her and then at Lonnie and then his knuckles. He went to help Benny up.

Benny held his bruised back, cursing Lonnie and swearing vengeance.

"I can have you arrested!" Lonnie shouted, "You came to my house and attacked me!"

"Whose name is on the deed?" Hop asked.

"What?" Lonnie and Joyce asked together.

"Whose name is on the. Damn. Deed," Hop repeated. The rage was still there, only barely back in control.

Joyce frowned and shrugged, "Mine. It's in my name. His credit was too bad to get the loan."

"Then it's her house, man," Benny said with a groan, standing up, "and we both heard her loud and clear: you are dis-invited to remain here."

"So beat it," Hop said. The two of them closed ranks between Joyce and Lonnie. Hop's knuckle were dripping with both his own and Lonnie's blood, "Joyce will have your stuff out here in the yard in the morning. You can come get it, then."

When Lonnie was gone, Joyce got towels of ice for them. Benny swallowed half a bottle of aspirin, and he and Hop gratefully stole a couple of Lonnie's beers from the fridge before dropping into kitchen chairs. Hop looked around, "Nice place you got, Joyce."

"Don't flatter me. It's a pigsty," she said. Unable to find a light she lit the smoke by the eye of the stove. The two of them in her kitchen was surreal. All they needed was Kathy riding around on Benny's back and the world would be like it was so long ago...

Straightening, drawing smoke into her lungs, she turned to the men in her kitchen. "I can't *believe* you DID THAT!" she exclaimed, pulling at her own hair.

"Isn't it what you wanted?" Benny asked.

"Yes--well, yeah. Not so violently. But--he's gone." She groaned and covered her eyes. "What am I supposed to say to the boys?"

"Where are they by the way?" Hopper asked.

Joyce gasped. "His mother's! Oh god he'll be going there once all his buddies refuse to take him in for the night."

Benny stood, chair scraping the floor. "I'll go get them," he said at once. "She's over on Maple, right?"

"Yeah. Yeah," Joyce said, grateful because she felt too stunned by the events to drive herself. "I'll call her so she knows to let them go with you. Thanks, Benny."

Benny took her car keys and left. Joyce plucked the phone from its cradle and let Mrs. Ludgate know the boys needed to come home and

that a friend was coming to get them for her. She didn't give details, not wishing to cause any more drama for the night.

That done, she drew a deep breath and turned small circles in her living room. It seemed so.... quiet. Her heart hurt. Hop's chair scraped the floor as he stood. "You're right, that got out of hand. I'm sorry, Joyce."

He reached her in the middle of the room and they looked into one another's eyes. His blue gaze was weighed with so much sadness. "I just needed to forget my own life--you know?"

"Oh, Hop, I get it."

"I shouldn't be here," he said, "I should be there with Sara. She's fighting so hard--" he choked and collapsed on the couch, covering his face. "But--I don't know if I can do it. She needs her daddy to be strong and I--"

"Hey, hey," Joyce sat beside him and gripped his thick knee. He dropped a heavy hand over hers.

"It's not natural," he said roughly over his tears, "You don't outlive your *baby*."

Tears slipped down Joyce's face and when they landed on his bloodied knuckles, he looked up. Their eyes met. He reached and cut his thumb through the tears on her chin.

Alcohol. Adrenaline. Grief. Shock. Revenge. Loneliness. Decade old memories uncovered out of the cold ground. There were a lot of little things that led to it, and *thinking* wasn't one of them. She took his face and kissed him. He kissed back.

She swung a leg over his lap and straddled him. They kissed and kissed. She could feel his wedding ring on her spine when he put his hands up the back of her shirt; she didn't care. She wanted to help him forget. She wanted to say thank you. She wanted what she had been too scared to take when it had been hers for the taking. She wanted just so many things.

In the scheme of things, she had only dated Jim for six months when

she was seventeen and all they ever did was kiss. That against ten years of sex and cohabitation and fighting and making up and parenting with Lonnie--it seemed like nothing. But kissing Jim Hopper again made her realize those six months were worth so much more.

His fervor left her breathless, heart racing away. It was like he *needed* her, which was not a feeling Lonnie ever gave her. His hands roamed her body and messed her hair and squeezed her to him with a dizzying passion. She held his face and returned his kisses.

He gripped her hips and ground up against her, and she ground back down on him hungrily. She pulled his shirt buttons out and felt his chest hair, rubbing her palms over his nipples and feeling them harden as his breath hitched. He growled and nibbled her lips, pushed her bra up and teased her breasts with his mouth trailing up to her neck where he bit down and sucked.

Headlights swept the windows. The sound of her own car engine. Hop and Joyce leapt apart. She got her shirt and bra back in order, and flattened her hair. He stood, buttoned his shirt and got his arousal under control before the boys, ten and six, crashed through the door, "Mom!" Jonathan called, "What happened?"

They both stopped dead when they saw Hopper. They frowned at the stranger in their house. Joyce drew her shoulders to her ears with a smile, "Nothing! I just missed you!"

"Why did Benny get us? Where's dad?"

Hopper cleared his throat, "I'm gonna step out and have a word with Benny." He slipped through the open door. Joyce herded her children to the couch.

"Lonnie isn't going to live here anymore," Joyce said.

"Did he hit you?" Jonathan asked at once. Joyce's heart broke.

"No, baby, but he doesn't love me. And I don't love him. All my love went straight to you, and you." She pinched them both in their soft little bellies. They giggled and knocked her hands away.

"Why are *they* here?" Jonathan asked, ever the astute observer of the unusual.

Joyce sighed. "They're my friends. I have friends, you know. Times like this it's good to have friends around."

Little Will swallowed that right down but she could see Jonathan wasn't satisfied. She stood and ordered them to get ready for bed as if it was any other day. She had to repeat herself, but eventually they hopped up and hurried along.

She stepped out on the porch. Hop and Benny were smoking on the step. They were in the middle of a conversation and she heard a few words-- *lord* and *salvation* --that made her smile. At the sound of her, Benny looked over his shoulder. "Ah, just in time. We were talking about the promise of eternal salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Hop snorted with laughter and elbowed the man. "Cut it out, Benny."

"Hey," Benny took the bud from his lips, "We came to talk about Jesus, right? So there. We talked about him. I'm not a liar."

Joyce giggled. "Thanks, Benny," she said, stooping to hug him. Benny gave her a one armed hug. He didn't have to get up and she only had to stoop a little. Hop hummed passed his cigarette as if he approved of what he saw.

She realized that with Lonnie gone in his mustang, the only car here was her own, which she would need first thing in the morning to get the kids to school.

"Do you guys need to use the phone to call a ride or...?"

Benny waved a hand. "Don't worry about it, hon. I live 'bout," he drew long on his cigarette and exhaled on the finish, "A mile through those woods right through there."

"Well, Hop, I have a couch if you need to wait 'til morning," she offered and hoped it sounded casual.

"He's coming with me," Benny said.

“Oh,” Joyce said. Hop’s eyes cut up to her. They both remembered the kiss, the old summer heat returning between them as she wiggled in his lap, his hands on her skin and his tongue in her mouth.

Hop’s eyes fell from her down to his wedding ring then out into the dark yard. Joyce got the message. It wasn't right anyway, to sleep with a married man. Especially considering why she threw Lonnie out. She put a hand to her head, wondering what the hell was wrong with her. Maybe Lonnie was right. Maybe she *was* crazy.

“Well, goodnight, boys,” she said and bent to kiss them both on the cheek, first Benny and then Hop. Her face stayed close to Hop’s as she said, “Thanks again.”

Hop looked back at her a minute and then with a throat clear looked away. Joyce straightened and retrieved a flashlight hanging from a nail in the wall beside the door. They stood and stretched a little in preparation for the impromptu hike through the woods, clicking on the flashlight with much thanks.

Hop ground his cigarette out on the porch post and put the bud in his pocket. “I’m serious, Joyce. Have his shit out here in a pile and *don't* let him in your house. Call the cops if he gives you one minute of trouble. Legally it's your place and he has no right no matter what he says.”

Joyce gave him a smile. “Okay, I got it. Thanks, Hop.”

She watched them amble away until she couldn't see the light of the flashlight anymore.

Life carried on for another year, significantly easier without Lonnie picking stupid fights, but at the same time so much harder. She went to bed alone and woke up alone and worked *all the time* and there was no end in sight.

It might as well have been headline news when, a year and half later, Jim Hopper returned to town for good. Divorced. Daughterless. Grieving. Though for all his jokes and smokes and beer, you wouldn't really know it. He seemed like every other unmarried jackass in Hawkins.

Joyce knew better, and so did what culture said to do. She brought over food. Not a homemade casserole, though; a number one with fries from Benny's. The big beefy man had volunteered her for delivery when she happened to mention, while in his restaurant, that she wished there was something she could do.

"Man's gotta eat," Benny said, putting the bag in her hand, "Take this to him. He's on your way home."

3. Chapter 3

Joyce found herself knocking on Hop's trailer door with a greasy bag from Benny's, half hoping he wouldn't answer, half dreaming that he would want more than food. In the year and a half since she threw Lonnie out, her sex life had flatlined. As wrong as it was, those few moments on her couch in Jim's lap with his wide, hot palms on her back had been the only highlight for a while.

The moment he opened the door, her hopes changed. He was a *slob* and looked so much worse than she last saw him. Dark bags under his bloodshot eyes. A full, unruly beard. His clothes were wrinkled and stained with food and sweat. She could smell that he hadn't taken a shower in a while and that he'd been chain smoking all day. He had a beer in one hand. "Heeeeyyyy, Joyce!" he said brightly. Great, so he was stoned, too.

She put the bag in his hand. "I heard, Jim. I'm *so sorry*. "

His mask of happiness fell so that his face matched his deadened eyes. "Christ, Joyce," he said. But he took the bag and turned into his living room, leaving the door open and thus inviting her in. She stepped through and saw what she expected to see. Empties and overflowing ashtrays and pill bottles. He obviously slept on the couch. The TV played the shopping channel.

"I know you probably don't want to talk but--"

"You're damn right I don't want to talk." he said. There wasn't even anger in his voice, just a bone weary exhaustion. He bit into the burger and sighed with his eyes closed, head tilted back. "Oh, Benny," he murmured past the food in his mouth.

Joyce wanted to help, and since he didn't want to talk she figured she could help in other ways. She located his trashcan and set to picking up the beer cans and dumping the ash trays.

"What the hell? Stop it," Hop said, batting a hand at her.

"You can wallow, but not in filth," she said. "Just let me. When did

you shower last?"

He pressed on his eyes with thumb and forefinger, "Okay, Joyce. I don't need you to come in here and take care of me. Got it?"

"*Shower* . Hop," she ordered. To her surprise he put the burger down and went. She took a peek at the pill bottles. Sleeping pills and mood stabilizers mostly. Based on their prescription date and how many were left she was pleased to determine he wasn't abusing them.

He left the bathroom door wide open, "Benny sent you, didn't he?"

"He's concerned, *obviously* ," Joyce called over the sound of squeaking knobs. "We all are."

The phone rang. He shouted, "Don't answer it!"

She answered it.

Hop cursed her from the shower as she put the phone between shoulder and ear and made up the couch bed. "Hello?"

"Oh," a female voice said, "Wow. Uh. Maybe I have the wrong number! I'm calling for Jim Hopper? It's his sister."

"Kathy?!" Joyce cried, "It's Joyce Byers!"

A gasp and then a laugh, "Joyce! OH MY GOD! How are you?"

Sinking onto the couch, Joyce gave a quick run down. Kids. Single mom. Shitty job. And because she knew none of it was impressive for some hot shot attorney like Kathy, she launched into what she knew about her oldest friend who had forgotten her. Kathy confirmed all that her mother had said--success, success, success--before saying, "Wow, so I wasn't expecting you to be at Jim's!"

It wasn't worded like a question, but it was an incredibly loaded one all the same.

"Ah, I just swung by to play the concerned neighbor. Stocking his freezer, making him get fresh air." She realized that answering the phone implied a more involved person than that.

"Well, God love you for that, Joyce Byers! Ah! I feel so much better about him moving out there all alone!"

"Alone? Aren't your folks still in town?" Joyce asked, but come to think of it, Joyce hadn't seen them in a while. She vaguely heard the shower cut off and a low warm buzz from the bathroom.

"No, no, they retired to Orlando last spring."

"Oh, okay. I hadn't heard."

"I will be sure to tell Mom you're there looking out for him. That'll make her feel so much better!"

Joyce felt a little queasy. Suddenly it felt like his family had all their burden brushed off onto her. She opened her mouth to form some kind of polite objection, something that made it clear she had other responsibilities than picking up Jim's dirty underwear and forcing him into the shower.

But then she remembered the acute grief of her father's sudden death and how the Hopper twins had held her up between them that summer, helping her to mend. No one ever made them do that. So Joyce said instead,

"It's the least I could do."

Looking up when she sensed movement, she saw Jim in the bathroom door, nothing but a towel slung low around his waist. The exhaustion was still there but he looked better. His caveman beard had been scrubbed and trimmed. Water drops fell from the ends of his shaggy blond hair. Others rolled down his body.

He wasn't exactly a Greek god, but he was solid and strong and still glistening from his shower.

"It's Kathy!" she said brightly to him. He scowled at her like it was her fault. Joyce handed the phone out, with a stern expression, "Talk to your sister."

He took the phone from her and put it to his ear with a grunt. Joyce slid into the kitchen to tidy up in there, pretending not to listen to

the one sided conversation.

“Yes... yeah... I know... Fuck, Kay, I gettit, just stop!...No. Not yet... Well it's not *great* ! ... well then don't next time! ... Yeah, sure, fine.... I said FINE!.... Love you, too.” SLAM.

Joyce stole a few of Hop's curly fries and was caught red handed. The half naked Hop appeared in his kitchen, livid. “Don't. Answer. My phone!”

“So that your family can worry from three states away?” she challenged. “Sure, thing, Jim.”

Without a word he ripped the fry box from her hand. She let him take it and made to move past him, but he caught her with an arm around her lower back, dragging her against him and into a kiss. He had brushed his teeth--in preparation for this?

Her arms went up around his shoulders and she kissed back. A year and a half--actually, two considering how long it had been since Lonnie touched her before he was gone--was a long time to be flatlined. Jim shocked her right back to life, his heavy hands on her breasts under her work shirt felt like those electric paddles. This time without the wedding ring.

He dropped the towel and pressed naked against her, pushing her to the door jam. She was surprised by the suddenness and the lack of preamble, but not offended. She understood the need for escape, and she knew his kisses like the well tread pathways through her most cherished memories.

Suddenly, he stopped kissing her. With this guilt ridden, *defeated* look he dropped naked onto the couch, face in his hands.

Dazed a little, she stayed there against the door jam for a moment. Her heart raced. Her mind spun in circles. What could he be guilty about? He wasn't married anymore--

But that was it, wasn't it?

Joyce stared at the broken man, afraid that Jim's fear of losing his daughter last year had led to him losing his wife. Guilt swamped her

at the idea that her attempt to comfort him last time had only doubled his pain now. He didn't just lose a baby. He lost his wife, too. And maybe Joyce had something to do with that.

She retrieved the towel from the floor and dropped it in his lap and sat beside him.

He cried. She put an arm around his bare shoulders. After a while, his sobs tapered off, and he sniffed and wiped his face with the towel. The same hand he used to do that had that blue braided bracelet on it, soaked through because he'd worn it even in the shower.

"My baby is dead, Joyce."

"I know, Hop."

He reached almost blindly for an orange bottle, and she did nothing as he swallowed the pills. She finished tidying up, and he got dressed and passed out face first in his couch. She left him snoring there.

Joyce returned three days later, on her next half day from work, to check up on him. After all, helping him the once didn't make up for the whole summer he helped her heal after her father. This time she brought Chinese food, had a little rehearsed speech about what happened while he was still married, (and she wore a push up bra for in case the speech did what it was supposed to do.)

But when she mounted the steps of his porch, whatever notions she'd been entertaining vanished. The thin trailer walls weren't doing much to muffle the sounds of two voices panting and moaning. The blinds right by her--and over his couch--rattled with a steady rhythm.

He had someone in there. Some unknown woman was giggling and egging him on. Joyce hurried back to her car, hot with humiliation. She had no idea who he had in there or where he met her but they were *clearly* having a good time. Or, at least, she was doing a well enough job at pretending.

By the time Joyce reached her house, she had decided that he could fuck his way through the whole town without her help and maybe the best thing she could do was to leave him alone. He didn't need

some single mother old flame hanging around him with ideas of rekindling things into an eternal flame.

Ridiculous fantasies with no ground in reality. He wasn't going to just *adopt* her family as his own to fill the void of his devastated life. Her kids weren't just going to heal his heart. He had to find his own way back; what did she know about helping a man who just lost his baby?

Joyce put whatever unresolved feelings she had for Jim Hopper in a box and lived her life. Single. Working every day. Working out visitation rights with Lonnie, who rarely showed for them. Vacuuming and dishes and laundry and no money to fix broken dryers. Finding time to hang things on a clothesline in between double shifts. Trying to quit smoking. Failing. Getting a pixie cut. Hating it. Not even caring when she heard Lonnie went to Indianapolis without so much as a goodbye to her or the boys.

Then, four years after she went to Hop when he lost his baby, he was in her living room, because she lost hers. Dead, Hop said with this unfathomable look of sorrow in his eyes. Drowned.

She couldn't believe it. She *wouldn't* .

And they were saying around town that Benny of all people was dead, too--they said it was suicide which made *no sense* to Joyce though she couldn't claim to have been particularly close to him since that one summer so long ago. She knew him only in so far as Benny helped every single soul to ever cross his path, which included her a couple of times.

Unable to sleep--no surprise--and unable to sit in her living room with that axe and the silence, she stepped out on the porch for fresh air and the bracing cold. That was when she noted that Chief Hopper's Jeep was still there, the man slumped in the driver's seat with his hat down over his eyes.

She scoffed and left the porch, stalking over to rap on the window.

4. Chapter 4

The cold of the November night had fogged the glass against Hopper's breath and body heat. Joyce could see her shadowy outline reflected in the glass, the stars behind her. Inside the Jeep, Hopper snored.

She knocked on the window, loudly and obnoxiously to vent her frustration as she asked loudly, "What are you doing, Hop?"

He bolted awake and gave her a groggy look. "Sleepin'," he answered.

"In my *driveway*?"

"Thought it'd best to be near. 'n case that thing you saw comes back."

At this she stopped and blinked, curling tighter inside her thin canvas jacket, breath white on the night air. "You believe me?"

"You're freezing," he said, his astute gaze dropping down her shivering body, "Get back in the house."

She did no such thing. She marched around the wide nose of the Jeep and got in the passenger side with a loud squeak of the old door. "You believe me," she said again.

"You asked me to," he said. The Jeep wasn't much warmer than outside. She shivered more. He shifted and elbowed out of his police windbreaker. She objected, but he put it around her. She was vividly reminded of her father's grave, when he'd done the same thing before he kissed her. These thoughts led naturally to the other kisses, the real ones full of heat and urgency.

The memories must have been on his mind, too, as he said softly, "We seem to be bound by grief, don't we?"

She huffed in agreement. Her father. His daughter. Now her Will. Tears slid down her cheeks. His heavy arm looped around her and he scooped her across the beach seat right up next to him.

“He’s not dead,” she rasped.

Hop breathed sharply like her words hurt him, like she had scooped some of her grief out and shoved it into his heart. His arm tightened around her, his mouth pressed to her hair. She shook her head. “He’s not, Hop. It’s not my boy you found.”

From the first minute she held Jonathan, there had been an internal pull, like a compass, always letting her know exactly where her kids were in the house or the yard. It didn’t work over large distances, but in calling range she could feel them both. She felt them both now. Will couldn’t possibly be all the way in the morgue. Too far.

His fingers took her jaw then, turned her head and tilted it and his mouth closed over hers. The kiss was deep and as he already had one arm over her and the other hand on the side of her face, she felt utterly covered by him.

For a moment she was too lost to care. She felt exhausted, heart broken, soul teetering on the edge of a bridge, welcoming the fall. Then, all at once, she came to her senses and pulled away.

“I can’t--” she stammered, “Hop, I have to--I have to be. Inside. He--he needs me. He’s in the lights. I can’t miss what he says.” She fumbled with the door handle and finally got it open. She fell from the Jeep but landed on her feet and slammed the door behind her.

“Joyce!” he called. She didn’t answer, fleeing into her house and slamming the door behind her. She couldn’t breathe. Her heart raced, hard and painful in her chest. She slid down the door and sat there in the floor, breathing her way through the attack.

The next attack she had was in that horrible suit in that nightmare other place, what had they called it? The Upside Down. Just the thought of her baby stumbling around through here with that thing trying to eat him. Oh god.

Beside her, Hop got her attention and helped her regain control. He helped her in so many other ways, too. His hands and his breath brought life back to her pale, lifeless baby. His arms carried Will back to the world they belonged to. Then, at the hospital, those arms

folded around her and she could hear his heart beneath her ear.

“Thank you,” she said on the front of her tears of relief. His mouth pressed against her hair and his arms tightened ever so much around her.

“Joyce,” he started. She pulled away and looked up at him. She thought she knew what he was going to say. But what with everything that happened--she had to focus on Will. Jonathan, too. They mattered more. He held her eye, seemed to understand, and let her go.

“Call me for anything,” he said. She nodded. He nodded. They held one another's eye again. At length he looked away, nodding more. “Yeah,” he said. “Okay. Kiss the kid for me.”

And with that he left. She watched him turn the corner, then returned to Will. She stayed at Will's bedside for four straight days but then she had to face the fact that she had to go back to work. She owed Donald two weeks of work and all the month's bills would be coming in soon. She didn't even want to think of her light bill.

So with a heavy heart, she left Jonathan with Will--they had agreed Will would stay in sight of either one of them for a while--and returned home to shower and get some rest in a real bed before her shift.

Her heart went into her throat when she came around the curve to find six vehicles and a crowd of people in her yard. News vans--and the Chief's Jeep. Hopper met her at her window, surging ahead of the flock of reporters.

“Joyce, don't say a word,” he grit soberly, opening her car door and hauling her out. With his arm around her and his hat dumped on her head to hide her face he escorted her across the yard and into the house. The heat from his huge head and the smell of his scalp eclipsed the sight of the reporters that stayed on them, all asking questions at the same time, shoving mics in her face. They wanted to know about The Boy Who Came Back to Life.

Hopper closed and locked the front door behind them. Joyce

removed his hat, gasping from the shock of it all. The questions they'd been shoving down her throat, about her mental health and the funeral expenses and her relationship with Will, how dare they?

"Joyce, I'm sorry," Jim said moving to close all the blinds on the total strangers who were shoving their cameras at the cracks in the curtains.

"Wha-How?" she stammered.

"I broke the story to a buddy of mine," Jim said.

"WHAT?" She flew at him, "THAT WASN'T THE DEAL YOU MADE!"

He caught her by the hands, "I made that deal with Brenner to save Will. But Brenner is dead and we have Will. Even Eleven got away. So why should we keep their sorry secrets? I didn't tell them the *exact* truth. I said that Hawkins Lab kidnapped Will for experiments and faked his death to keep him forever. I told about the fake body, and that they took Terry Ives' little girl when she was born, and how she got away and they killed Benny to cover it up."

Joyce dropped on her couch, covering her ears against the reporters knocking on the door. Jim sat beside her, an arm over her shoulders. "I've given them a statement so they've got their sound bite. They'll leave after a while. I know this is the last thing you need right now, but I felt it was the best thing to do. There were a lot of questions about Will's return after such a public coverage of his body being pulled from the quarry."

She gripped his knee. "You're right. I just--I wasn't prepared for this. A-are they going to follow me to work or?--"

"I think if you give them what they've come for, they'll leave you alone."

"But--"

"I can write up a little statement. You would just read it. You wouldn't have to answer their questions. Jonathan and Will, too."

"Will? They're going to hound him like this, too?"

"He's safe from them in the hospital. He can read a statement when he leaves."

Joyce sniffed "Okay. And--and that'll make them all go away?"

"Mostly. After that, we'll all keep our heads down and eventually they'll give up and go to the next big story."

Joyce groaned and covered her eyes. Jim combed her hair behind her ear. "I'll be with you through every bit of it."

She leaned into his touch and looked up into his eyes. "Thank you, Jim. If not for you..." she shook her head against the terrible alternative to recent events. His palm flattened against her cheek, warm and gentle.

All the old fantasies rushed back to her then, being with Jim, having the comfort of him daily rather than in brief bursts sporadically through the years. She didn't want to just have him but to keep him. Heart swelling, she knew she wanted to belong to him for the rest of her life.

But then all at once, she remembered the woman in his trailer that day, four years ago, when she had hung her hopes on him last. She had come around and offered him comfort but he hadn't taken it and then, within days, he sought it elsewhere.

Joyce pulled her hand away, checking herself. The Jim she remembered, the one she fantasized about, was not necessarily the man in front of her and he hadn't been for years.

He'd been seen about town with a string of women over the years and while she had no illusions that he loved any of them, it all just seemed to put him in a different league than any she ever beloved to.

He cleared his throat. Somehow it was like he shared her exact thoughts again. "I know I've been avoiding you all these years and it's not--Joyce, those women that I've passed the time with, they meant nothing. Not like you. You.... You've always meant--"

She kissed him, soft and sweet, but pulled back right away with a bashful smirk. "I need to shower."

His face had this dopey look so like when they were kids that she cupped his cheek. "Stay with me tonight? Jonathan's gonna be at the hospital and I--I don't want to be alone."

He nodded. "Yeah, I'll stay. I sleep on my couch so much anyway it wouldn't be a change."

"Not on the couch, Jim."

His eyebrows went up, and his lips cracked into a wide grin. "Okay."

She took his hand and stood, pulling him up with her and down the hall to the bedroom. She stopped him there with a hand on his chest, "I'll be out in a minute," and shoved him gently through the bedroom door.

He went backwards, that boyish grin and a devilish sparkle in his eyes "I'll be here," he laughed a puff of hot breath. His astonishment matched her own. The night was laid out in front of them, all theirs, and no teenage insecurities or real life grief to get in the way.

Joyce cleaned herself at a record pace, and blushed when she stopped the water and could hear low music. David Bowie. She wrapped up in a towel tucked under her arms and--remembering when he had emerged from his bathroom in just a towel all those years ago--she stepped across the hall and into the bedroom.

He had removed his boots and they sat on the rug under the bedpost where his coat, belt, gun, and hat were hanging. His shirt was unbuttoned and he stood over her record player. He turned at the sound of her, and his jaw dropped as he took in the sight of her in the towel. Then he smiled.

She closed the door behind her and--dropped the towel. It'd been *years* since she got naked for a man. The simple act of letting the towel fall felt like vaulting over a mountain into thin, breathless air. Jim's eyes flashed with hunger as he took her in, and he crossed the room in two big strides, grabbed her up in his arms and kissed her.

Her feet left the floor and then the couple fell to the bed. With reverent kisses, Jim took her away to a new place. All she could think

was finally, *finally*, after so long...

There was so much she wanted to give, and so much she wanted to take. And that hungry, rejoicing ache in her seemed to reflect in him when he whispered her name, touched her and *took* her.

In all her life she had only ever had sex with Lonnie, but it felt like she *knew* Jim better than she ever knew the father of her children. She knew his body, what it could do to her, knew how to surrender to him utterly.

There was no staring at the ceiling and thinking of other things here. She was in Jim; his eyes, his breath, his touches. Nothing else mattered but him and what he brought her and what she could bring him.

For all the depths of what they made together, there were heights, too. Joyce had never in her life laughed while making love but she was having *so much fun* as they rolled and flipped around, changing position with the eagerness of the young trying to do everything at once.

Afterwards, she listened to his heart, riding his chest up and down on his big even breaths which fluttered her hair.

"I should have gone with you when you asked," she mused out loud.

"What?" He tilted her face up to his, and thumbed at the tears he found on her cheeks. The drops slid out slowly in silence. "That was so long ago," he said, "We were so young."

"But I loved you," she whispered, fresh tears rushing from her eyes, "And it was real love. So real it scared me. I hid from it rather than--" her voice caught but she pushed on. He wiped her tears. "I convinced myself that something lesser was more real than what we had because that way I didn't have to--to--" she sniffed, "I could stay where things were easy..." She looked into his blue eyes pleadingly, "I should have been braver for you. For us."

He breathed her name, cupping her face with a tender caress. His eyes held the tears she had yet to cry. He kissed her lips, then her

eyes and cheeks and neck and held her close, stroking her hair. "Whatever happened, we're here now."

"And I'm just as scared now as I was then," she confessed, the raw heart of the storm in her chest. Jim sucked in a breath and pulled away just enough to look her hard in the eye. She saw his tears fall.

"You *don't have* to be afraid," he whispered.

By now, the sunlight slanted through the bedroom window, a thick white gold beam. Jim checked the yard for reporters. It seemed his official police statement would be enough for tonight; they all had bigger fish to fry at the state police station anyway.

"Get dressed," he said. "I want to take you somewhere."

5. Epilogue

EPILOGUE

The sunset that night was beautiful. Joyce breathed in the peace of it, allowing it to wash like a balm over her worried soul. She felt fifteen years younger. That was because she was sitting at the quarry with Jim, under the same blanket, leaning back between his knees just like when they were young.

Jim had his big arms around her and she idly skimmed her fingers through the hair on the backs of his hands and arms. As always, the blue bracelet was on one wrist. She ran her fingers along it, and felt his lips smile against her hair. D A D D Y. Without a doubt in her mind she knew Jim Hopper had been a wonderful father. She touched each little bead, imagining a sick little girl keeping the fear away by stringing beads and braiding rubber bands.

One of the beads turned under her touch and she frowned when she realized the cubes were two flat beads woven together with different letters on each side. S A R A J

"Sara J," she whispered, "That's pretty."

Jim loosed an amused breath through his nose, "We only ever said the J when she was in trouble so when she made these matching bracelets for us, she hated that she needed the J to match the same amount of letters as Mommy and Daddy. She said, 'but it's like I'm always going to be in trouble.'" He chuckled, warm breath puffing over Joyce's shoulder, "And I said, 'No sweetheart. The J doesn't mean you're in trouble. It just means we need you to hear us when we tell you something.' and she smiled real big and said, 'Well then wear this, and I'll always hear you.'" His voice thinned and he stopped talking.

Joyce turned her head and kissed him sweetly. He accepted the kiss and sniffed. "Haven't taken it off since. Maybe then I'll always have Sara J listening in." He laughed at himself.

"She is," Joyce whispered. The same way she had known her Will

had been in the light bulbs, she knew his Sara was in the sunset. She reached up and brushed her fingers through Jim's hair as a peaceful silence fell over them. Out of curiosity, and also because she knew he was enjoying talking about her, she asked, "Does the J stand for anything?"

His lips twitched into a sheepish grin, and he burrowed to kiss her neck. "Sara Joyce."

She gasped, No!"

He laughed fondly with a nod. She sat up and twisted out of her arms to look at him.

"No ! Your wife let you name her baby after one of your ex girlfriends?"

"God, no, she thought I just came across it in a baby book."

"Classy, Jim."

He chortled, pulling her back against him. "Ah, come on. First love." He kissed her neck, "The rocking summer of '67." He kissed her neck again. "A *chaste* romance. You were my first heartbreak, Joyce, taught me about myself, what's classier? And besides, you were my destiny all along, right?"

Full to bursting with love, Joyce shook her head fondly. "I can't believe you."

He chuckled but not in an amused way. "When they said she was dying I just wanted to come home...and when I lost her I fled back here looking for something. Everyone had changed, nothing was the same." He inhaled loudly and exhaled with a tired groan, "ah, Joyce..." he nosed her hair and kissed the side of her head. "It was a long road back, but... I finally made it." His arms tightened around her. "I'm home."

Breathless, she squeezed his thighs on either side of her. He peppered her with kisses and they cuddled in contented silence as the sun finally winked out behind the hills. Shortly after, they packed up and headed back. She called the hospital to check up on Will and

Jonathan who both reported with smiling voices that all was well, and then she climbed into bed beside Jim, sliding gratefully under his heavy arm.

Not all was right in her world just yet--Will was still in that hospital bed and reporters weren't going to be leaving them alone for some time and then she had to do the house before Christmas... No, nothing was perfect. But just then, as her eyes fell closed, she felt like she was on her way to having the life she was always meant to have.